

STATE'S DELAYS ON I-86 COST THE SOUTHERN TIER ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey
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A recent headline in the Press & Sun-Bulletin jumped off the page at me: "I-86 Delays Could Be Costly." I've been making that argument to the New York State Department of Transportation for several years. Now we have proof, courtesy of an expert study commissioned by the I-86 Coalition, that the Southern Tier's economy stands to gain \$3.2 billion within two years of the designation of Interstate 86. Every day that the full designation of Interstate 86 is delayed, our region is losing out on opportunities for economic growth.

Given the projected impact of I-86 on Binghamton and the Southern Tier, one would think that officials at all levels of government would be doing everything possible to complete the designation. But our state government seems intent on stalling the project for decades, thereby delaying the economic benefits that an interstate highway will bring. State DOT officials have said that work on I-86 might not be completed for 12 years or more. The state claims that they cannot pursue an aggressive construction schedule for I-86 because they don't have the money.

That is not so. Due to the efforts of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and myself, the 1998 federal highway authorization included language designating Route 17 as Interstate Highway 86. We knew that in order to bring the highway up to interstate standards, the state would need to do significant construction. So we also provided a windfall in transportation funding for New York State -- more than \$8 billion for roadwork. To provide an additional incentive for state action on I-86, Congressman Houghton and I secured more than \$20 million in the bill to be used at the three interchanges that needed the most work.

The state's total projected cost for all of the necessary upgrades on the highway is \$550 million. That's less than 7 percent of the total funding that we secured from the federal government in the 1998 law. It is a very small price to make the state's major east-west thoroughfare an interstate highway -- especially when doing so has the potential to bring more than \$3 billion in economic growth to a region that desperately needs it.

The problem is not that the state can't afford to do the work. The problem is that I-86 simply isn't a high enough priority for the state government. We need to let them know that it is our top priority. We've given the state government two years to take action on I-86; now we need to apply a little grassroots pressure.

The state is scheduled to release its five-year transportation plan on April 1. We need to take action now to ensure that I-86 is a top priority in that plan. In conjunction with the Broome County Chamber of Commerce, I am holding a public meeting on I-86 on March 6. I encourage business, government and community leaders to attend, as well as anyone who has an interest in the economic future of this community.

Then we'll take our findings to Albany, where we'll let Assembly and Senate leaders know how important I-86 is to our communities. We need to make the case that every wasted day costs the Southern Tier money, jobs and residents. The residual effects impact our local governments and school budgets.

The upgrade of Route 17 to I-86 is perhaps the single most important part of our overall strategy for economic growth. But every day of delay costs us jobs and opportunities. Albany already has enough federal money to do the job. Now lets get on with the work.